

Minutes of Mojave Ground Squirrel Conservation Strategy
Trona Senior Center, Trona, California
November 3, 2000

A copy of the meeting agenda is attached.

Bob Stub opened the meeting at 1:10 PM. He led the Pledge of Allegiance. Bob served as moderator of the meeting. Valery Pilmer from the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) and Ed LaRue a biological consultant for BLM and Becky Jones from the California Department of Fish and Game (DFG) were on the panel to provide information and respond to questions.

Each person attending introduced himself or herself.

Bob explained the meeting format would consist of a brief introduction to the recently published draft evaluation report, Suggested Conservation Strategies for Mojave Ground Squirrel and Appendices (MGS Report).

Valery described the area covered by the proposed West Mojave Plan and the MGS conservation area. The need for these designations arises from State requirements under the California Endangered Species Act and the Bureau of Land Management's California Desert Conservation Area (CDCA) Plan to promote the conservation of MGS in essential and crucial habitats. The MGS strategy proposed in the MGS Report is a starting point. The West Mojave Plan's Task Group number 1 will take up the proposal for the first time at the next Task Group 1 meeting in Victorville, December 1, 2000. Pages 3-1 through 3-44 of the MGS report give the complete history and description of the MGS area-planning process.

Bob pointed out that more information can be viewed by addressing the West Mojave website, which can be found at: www.ca.blm.gov/cdd/wemo.html

Ed La Rue discussed MGS habits and behaviors. He also explained the relationship between the proposed MGS conservation area and the proposed Desert Tortoise Desert Wildlife Management Area (DWMA). The proposed MGS Conservation Area overlaps with the proposed Tortoise DWMA on approximately 1,583 square miles, or about 22% of the known MGS range. An additional 1,425 square miles, located north of the tortoise DWMA, is proposed specifically for MGS conservation. These two areas combined, at approximately 3,008 square miles, include 39% of the known range of the MGS. Ed pointed out that MGSs require less protection from vehicular traffic than the Desert Tortoise, and there are other considerations that differ for protection of the two species. Of the 135 management prescriptions identified for the desert tortoise, about half apply to conservation of the MGS.

Ed reviewed the history of development of the proposed MGS conservation area.

Bob then opened the meeting for responses by the panel to written questions previously submitted by the audience in attendance. In these minutes the questions are paraphrased for brevity. Bob has the original written questions in the records. The questions are in bold and the panel's responses follow.

1. What biological assessments have been done to justify the MGS plan?

Studies done for the CDCA and by DFG were used. No studies since 1998 have been done. Currently, trapping is used as an indicator of occupied MGS habitat, or the project proponent may opt to mitigate as if the MGS occurs in lieu of trapping.

Establishment of the MGS area will make development easier and more expeditious while simultaneously providing for the conservation of the MGS.

The mitigation ratio(s) could be fixed dollar amounts to avoid the need for project proponents to find and purchase compensation habitat on their own.

2. What documentation exists to support inclusion of Olancha in the MGS Plan?

Jeff Aardahl and Paul Roush (BLM biologists) observed MGS in the Olancha area in 1985, resulting in a range extension to the north.

3. What does "withdrawal" in the mining context mean?

Withdrawal would take away the right to file new mining claims in the area withdrawn. No lands within the MGS area are proposed for withdrawal. Mineral withdrawal is proposed for source areas only, which may be identified during focused studies implemented by the Plan or other entity. None have been identified.

4. How will Indian Land be designated such as 640 acres NE of NAWS?

Don't know.

5. Is MGS a species of sub-species?

Species.

6. What elevation are MGSs found?

2,500 to 5,500 feet.

7. Is Searles Valley a biological sink for MGS?

Don't know.

8. Is the Argus mountain range an effective MGS barrier?

Maybe, depends upon elevations.

9. Are Searles and Panamint Lakes MGS barriers?

Probably, although juveniles show remarkable dispersal ability and could cross shorter distances over lakebeds and other unsuitable or marginal habitats.

10. Is the MGS plan being promoted to enable the federal government to acquire the water in Homewood Canyon?

No.

11. What is the timeline for the MGS conservation area adoption?

The first Task Group discussion – December 1, 2000.
Three to four months to address inputs and resolve differences.
Draft EIR/S next summer.

12. When will MGS decisions be made?

See 11. See 10.

13. What effect will approval of the Fort Irwin expansion have on the MGS area?

In discussions between the Department of Defense and Department of the Interior thus far, minimizing and mitigating impacts to the desert tortoise has been the focus. It is not likely that the proposed MGS Conservation Area would be enlarged, but the Army may have to assist the planning effort in implementing conservation measures within the protected area, which could include land acquisition.

14. How far away is the MGS found?

The MGS is found only in the Western Mojave Desert. Squirrels east of the Mojave River have been identified as the round-tailed ground squirrel, which is a different species than the MGS.

15. What guarantees do residents of Homewood and Crow Canyons have against additional rules regulations?

The intent of the West Mojave plan is to make regulation in different localities consistent and easier.

16. How does MGS designation affect the other twelve species controls?

The West Mojave plan is expected to simplify planning and government permitting, while providing for the conservation of the MGS.

17. While the MGS plan is pending, how are new land use applications handled?

The same as now.

18. What is the effect of the existing MOU between DFG and BLM during the MGS pending period?

Although there is an existing MOU between the BLM and CDFG, no new MOU has been developed as a result of the West Mojave planning effort. Any in effect will remain effective (status quo).

19. Does the MGS plan break the MGS area into categories?

The Desert Tortoise area has categories; the MGS area does not. You are either in or out.

20. How will disturbed habitat areas in the MGS area be addressed?

The Task Group will work out specifics. DFG might examine a particular site. This topic is open for discussion.

21. What minimum size would apply to source area?

This has not been determined.

22. Why hasn't Trona been excluded from the MGS area?

Trona is yet to be heard. Same thing for other localities in the Trona north area. Boundary modifications are possible. Exclusion zones (areas of no survey) have only been identified for the desert tortoise, and at this time are not applicable to the MGS.

23. What environmental factors like slope, soil, salt, etc limit MGS habitation?

Rainfall is the most important factor. Less than 75mm or 3 inches is bad for MGS population. No information on the other factors.

24. Could the MGS boundary in Inyo County be adjusted to avoid private and include public property?

Yes, if the property is in the MGS range.

25. Page 3-7 lists Trona as a sixth source area, is this correct?

That reference is an error. Trona is not a source area.

26. Is the federal government going to subsidize loss of income resulting from the WMP?

Discussion is going on with County. One consideration is to release some federal land for development.

27. Can I receive copies of all reports?

Specific document requests will be accommodated. The library has most documents.

28. Why is my small land being treated same as large landowners?

Projects authorized by either ministerial or discretionary County or City permits are those that could be affected by the proposed conservation strategy. Home improvements and other development not requiring ministerial or discretionary permits will not likely be affected under the proposed Plan.

29. Is the West Mojave Plan going to be a model for others like NEMO?

No, NEMO is ahead of WMP.

30. Are there any conflicts between various desert area plans?

Yes, meetings are being held to resolve conflicts.

At this time Bob opened the meeting to verbal questions from the floor.

1. How much is mitigation going to cost per acre?

Cost or ratio has not been decided.

2. Why should we change anything? Government already gets enough money.

The MGS plan will streamline development. Known habitat and costs will help developers.

3. What will be the difference in developing blue and white areas?

The fee will be different, likely higher in the MGS Conservation Area and lower outside that area.

4. Will costs be higher if MGS on property?

Yes, measures other than mitigation may be required.

5. If MGS are on land, will trapping and COE permits be required?

No.

6. What will be the impact on homeowners of small backyard improvements?

Don't know, probably related to footprint of improvement and requisite County/City permitting.

7. What will be the new mitigation cost?

Under the WMP, it will be a set amount.

8. Could there be different fees for different areas within MGS area?

Yes, that could be part of the plan negotiation process.

9. What if small developer is found to be a source of MGS?

That is not likely to happen.

Bob gave his address and email and asked for written comments from people wanting to adjust the proposed MSG boundaries.

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The meeting was adjourned at 3:45 PM.